

VZCZCXRO7141
PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR
DE RUEHKU #1013/01 2951313
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 221313Z OCT 09
FM AMEMBASSY KUWAIT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4091
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 001013

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/13/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [KISL](#) [KU](#)
SUBJECT: KUWAITI FEMALE MP FIGHTS FOR RETURN TO COEDUCATION

REF: A. RIYADH 1342
[1](#)B. 1994 KUWAIT 04046
[1](#)C. 2000 KUWAIT 03466
[1](#)D. 2008 KUWAIT 804
[1](#)E. 2008 KUWAIT 90
[1](#)F. 2008 KUWAIT 154

Classified By: PolCouns Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

1.(C) Summary. On October 6, in the wake of the September opening of Saudi Arabia's first co-educational university, Kuwaiti MP Rola Dashti proposed an amendment which would effectively nullify the law forbidding coeducation at private universities in Kuwait. Kuwaiti politicians and students are split on the issue, although the majority of Kuwait University's female students support coeducation, according to a recent local poll. Given strong opposition to the measure among parliament's Islamists and tribalists, Dashti's desegregation amendment is likely to be voted down shortly after the assembly reconvenes on October 27. End Summary.

KUWAITIS' REACTIONS

2.(C) On October 6, in the wake of the September opening of Saudi Arabia's co-educational King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (Ref A), female Shi'a MP Rola Dashti proposed an amendment which would effectively nullify an existing law forbidding coeducation at private universities in Kuwait (law number 34 of 2000). On October 13, former parliamentary candidate Thikra Al-Rashidi (PhD in Constitutional Law from Cairo University, previously a lawyer in the Kuwaiti Supreme Court) told Poloff she believes the influence of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (ICM) and Salafis in Kuwaiti universities and Kuwaiti politics is ebbing because voters have come to perceive these groups as hypocrites who only use religion to advance their own agendas. She added that Saudi Arabia's decision to allow desegregated classes at the new King Abdullah University for Science and Technology was a blow to Kuwaiti Islamists' efforts to segregate classes here (Ref A). Reflecting the changing perspectives of some Kuwaitis on the law, Shi'a MP Saleh Ashour told Poloff on October 8 that although he voted for the 2000 gender segregation law, he now feels that gender-segregation of classrooms serves little purpose if men and women are still able to intermingle in the cafeteria or library outside classes (as is the case at most private university campuses). According to Ashour, the 2000 law is ineffective, in any event, because it did not achieve its purpose of preventing an unmarried man and woman from being alone together. (Note: He referred to a hadith of the Prophet Mohammad: "Whenever a man is alone with a woman, the Devil makes a third." End note.)

BACKGROUND: EARLY CO-EDUCATION AT KUWAIT U

3.(C) For the first two decades following its 1966 opening, Kuwait University (KU) had a very liberal atmosphere: mixed-gender classes and women in miniskirts were commonplace. With Islamism on the rise in Kuwait in the wake of the trauma of the 1990-91 invasion and liberation (Sunni Islamists won about twenty seats out of fifty in Kuwait's 1992 parliamentary election, as opposed to only about ten in the previous National Assembly), the newly appointed Islamist dean of KU's Faculty of Arts began segregating classes in 1994, outraging liberal professors and students (Ref B). In 1996, the National Assembly banned co-ed classes at KU and all other state universities and technical colleges. In 2000, the Islamist-heavy parliament passed a bill allowing the establishment of private universities, but under the proviso that these universities be gender-segregated (Ref C). The government and liberal MPs had opposed the amendment requiring segregation and its passage was a public embarrassment to then-defacto-PM Shaykh Sabah Al Sabah (the current Amir), who said that Islamists' efforts had encouraged "terrorism in some mosques" (Ref C).

BACKGROUND: ENFORCEMENT STALEMATE

KUWAIT 00001013 002 OF 003

4.(C) Although KU officials completed implementation of gender-segregation by 2001, consecutive Ministers of Education chose not to antagonize liberal elements and ignored the legal requirement to enact segregation in private universities (Ref D). However, in January 2008 Islamist MPs brought a vote of no-confidence against liberal Education Minister Nouriya Al-Sabeeh, accusing her of misleading MPs, committing administrative and legal wrongdoing, violating national mores and contributing to the deterioration of Kuwait's education system by her failure to implement the law (Ref E). In backroom maneuvering, the GOK allied with the Islamists (notably the ICM) to assure that Sabeeh would survive the no-confidence vote, which she did. In exchange, the GOK promised the Islamists that it would enforce the 2000 gender segregation law in private universities. A month later, in February 2008, liberal MP Ali Al-Rashed attempted to head off this enforcement effort by submitting an amendment to parliament to eliminate the 2000 gender segregation law (Ref F). Rashed soon received a death threat from an unidentified caller who claimed that the bill "is not in line with Kuwait's Islamic traditions." Islamist MPs quickly condemned the threat, but Rashed's bill still failed to gain traction in the Assembly.

DASHTI USES CONSTITUTION TO RENEW DESEGREGATION PUSH

5.(C) Following the decisive Islamist segregation victories in 1996 and 2000, liberal frustration over the 2008 Sabeeh deal, Rashed's failed bill and the stalemate which has followed, MP Dashti -- one of the four women to break the parliamentary gender barrier in May 2009 -- is making another attempt to counter university segregation. Taking aim at the 2000 law, Dashti argued that the Kuwaiti constitution's article thirty, which guarantees freedom of choice, does not allow for a law which forces all universities to be gender

segregated and has proposed an amendment which would allow private universities to be co-ed if they so choose.

WHAT DO THE STUDENTS THINK?

6.(U) A March 2009 survey of female students at Kuwait University (who comprise two-thirds of the student body) by Al-Qabas newspaper found that many of the students disliked gender-segregated classes. Following up, Poloff visited Kuwait University during an October student election to survey student opinions. In our informal poll, a majority of the male students Poloff spoke to (even those voting for the liberal party in the student election), said that they supported gender segregation, mostly in the belief that it helped students to focus better on their studies. When asked about whether such a university atmosphere would leave students unprepared for a co-ed post-graduate work atmosphere, many students replied that they support having gender segregated offices at work. While female students who were voting for conservative parties also tended to support segregation, it was much easier to find supporters for co-ed education among liberal women students than among the men. (Note: In Poloff's ad hoc survey, business department students tended to be very liberal and Shari'a department students were very conservative, while social sciences department students were moderately conservative. End note.) Female students pointed out that gender segregation resulted in having less class selection and that the best professors usually taught the girls' classes, leaving male students at a disadvantage. They also noted that since most professors are men, most "all-female" classes still had a man in them.

COMMENT

7.(C) Dashti's desegregation amendment is a strong effort on behalf of gender equality, but -- wishful thinking aside -- it is likely to be voted down. Islamists and tribalists maintain a significant presence in Kuwait's parliament. As they are virtually unanimous in their opposition to integrated classes, and not overly fond of Dashti herself --

KUWAIT 00001013 003 OF 003

whom they view as a flamboyant sign of the female peril -- they are almost certain to defeat her measure absent strong GOK lobbying, which is unlikely given the general unpopularity of the bill among the organized and voting public.

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
visit Kuwait's Classified Website at:

<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Kuwa> it

JONES